



October 3, 2004

Mark 7:24-30
Who Are God's Children?
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It is another World Communion Sunday. And it's another year in which we find ourselves in a world that knows little of true communion. We are divided by race and by gender, by economics and politics, and perhaps most of all by religion. So what does the table of communion mean? Is this just another thing that separates us from them? Or is it the place where we learn something about how to cross the barriers that divide us?

After feeding the 5,000, healing the sick, teaching the crowds, and arguing with the Pharisees, Jesus was tired. So he left Galilee and went into Gentile territory, to the beach community of Tyre. Mark makes it clear that Jesus really needed this vacation by telling us, "He went into a house and did not want anyone to know he was there." But when a Gentile woman heard that Jesus was in her area she barged her way into the house, threw herself at his feet, and begged him to cast the evil spirit out her daughter who was at home.

Our expectation is that Jesus will surely have compassion on this desperate woman and heal her daughter. But what he says is, "Let the children be fed first. For it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." We are stunned! This doesn't sound like Jesus. If nothing else this passage illustrates that the Bible was clearly written by the inspiration of the Spirit because Mark would never have written this story on his own. It just isn't good PR for the movement.

The Biblical commentators on Mark's gospel hit this passage like a speed bump at 60 mph. Trying to defend Jesus, they come up with the most interesting explanations. Some claim Jesus was tired and knew he shouldn't be doing ministry right then. When you're overextended you tend to focus and say things like, "I just do Jews. No Gentiles." But Jesus had already healed Gentiles, so clearly that wasn't the problem. Besides, this isn't a burned out do-gooder. This is the Son of God who has the words of life and we have to take all of his words seriously. Other scholars note that the word Jesus used for dogs was used only for little dogs - puppies. So maybe Jesus was speaking to her in a way that was actually affectionate. But even if we can get around Jesus calling this woman a dog that still doesn't deal with the more pressing issue of her daughter's need. Still others think Jesus was testing the woman, just to see how she would respond. But the test is too great. Any of you who have children know that when something is wrong with them, when something evil has hold on them, you are not ready to take a test. You just want a little healing. One scholar actually claimed Jesus must have smiled and winked at the woman when he said these words. But the text doesn't say anything about a wink. It just says what it says.

Let me suggest another interpretation. Jesus meant what he said. This woman does not deserve Jesus' mercy. Neither does her daughter. Neither do you or I. Just because we have needs, even great needs, that does not mean that we deserve to be healed. Healing isn't something you earn because you have lived a pretty good life. It comes only as a grace, an unmerited gift from Jesus.

Twelve years ago I was diagnosed with a cancer that had metastasized into my chest. About the same time, David, the 20 year old son of our Associate Pastor, was also diagnosed with a similar cancer. We received the same treatment and often even sat together in the same waiting room at the hospital. Two years after the diagnosis they could not find any trace of the cancer remaining in me, and in that same year I performed David's funeral. I was grateful to be healed, but along with the gratitude came a tremendous amount of confusion. As I led the congregation through David's funeral and stared at his sobbing father, my colleague, on the front pew, I conducted a little argument with myself: "Why am I alive? Why is David dead?" Every time I perform the funeral for someone who has died from that awful disease the confusion overwhelms me again. I know the people I bury. I know that often their lives were better than mine. And I know that whatever the reason is that I am still alive, it is not because I deserve to be. It is confusing trying to make sense of such a grace. I also look at couples who have great marriages when others of us who also worked hard on them do not. I remember a couple of weeks ago that some of us were merely inconvenienced by the floods in our town while others, who are good people, were wiped out. I think about our nation that has so much when other nations also filled with hard workers have so little. Perhaps blessings have little to do with our hard work. Perhaps it is just mercy. And as Jesus reminds this woman who is in great crisis, when it comes to receiving mercy, what you deserve is beside the point.

We have gone a little crazy over the concept of deserving. One of the reasons why our world is so divided is that we are all insisting on getting what we deserve. That makes us very much afraid that somebody will take what by rights is ours. So we divide the world between us and them. "They are not like you. They have different colored skin or language. They have different religion or politics. They are Gentiles." So we gather the people around us who are like us and together we demand our rights, our piece of the American pie, before "they" can take it away.

By contrast, notice the amazing response of the woman to Jesus' statement about throwing the food of the children to the dogs. She did not claim to be a child of God, and she did not demand her right to have a place at the table. Instead she said, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It isn't often that Jesus gets impressed in the gospels, but became so excited that he had found someone who was more committed to his mercy than to her rights that he cast the demon out of her daughter.

When you come to Jesus' table today, you are making a radical statement in our world. You are giving up demanding your rights and are asking instead for the mercy of God. This is the holy table of Jesus Christ, where the Holy Spirit invites us to enter into the Son's communion with the Father. None of us ought to even be here by rights. But we are here because, like this Gentile woman, by faith we have come to see that if even a morsel of grace were to fall our way, it could restore us to the Savior who can forgive what we have made sinful, heal what we have made

broken, and cast out the evil we have made normal.

It is striking that the woman had to go home to find her daughter healed. “The child was lying on the bed and the demon gone.” Maybe she first thought Jesus would come and do something magical to her daughter, but all he did was promise that she was going to be okay. It may have taken some faith to ask Jesus to cast the evil out of her daughter, but it took a lot of faith to go home simply trusting in Jesus. We, too, have to leave this table as a people who are changed by our total dependence on the mercy we have found here.

By the mercy of God, the woman’s daughter was healed. But eventually the daughter became a woman, then an old woman, and still she died. And perhaps there was mercy for that day too. The little girls don’t always survive, as the mothers of Sudan know all too well. Sometimes young men like David die too soon. Sometimes marriages still unravel in spite of our prayers and hard work. Sometimes the rains fall too hard and the flood waters rise too high in our lives. But at all times there is opportunity to cry out for mercy from a God who will give us himself.

The reason we call you to have faith in the grace of God is not because it will pry blessings from his hands. It doesn’t give you the salvation you want. It gives you the Savior. Our faith is not a faith *that*. It is faith *in*. We do not have faith *that* what we want will happen, but faith *in* Jesus whatever happens. For it is Jesus who will be our Savior in life and in death, in binding and in loosing.

Here at his table we receive just a taste of grace, just a crumb of it, just enough to remind us how hungry we are for this merciful God. But tasting that grace changes every other relationship we have.

What would happen if in the middle of one of the Presidential debates, one of the candidates said, “I’m not going to debate what you said or what I said anymore. I’m not going to debate if my plan or your plan will make us more prosperous. Instead, I want to debate how our souls got so dark, how we became so obsessed with what we deserve, how such language has only divided us. I even want to debate if we really deserve to turn the phrase “God bless America” into an imperative.” (The phrase can only be spoken, like a desperate Gentile mother, pleading for a merciful blessing. And the blessing can only be received as our father Abraham received it - who was blessed to be a blessing to all of the families of the earth.) What would happen if one of the presidential candidates said something like that? Well you know what would happen. It would be the same thing that happened to Jesus. That candidate would be crucified in the polls.

So maybe it falls to the church to say it. Rather than trying to capture God in a political platform, maybe we are called to be the voice that is clear about the common need for mercy from God. For that alone can bind us together. And if we believed that, maybe at least the churches could take a step toward world communion. Amen.